

IN THE FACE OF ALL THE CHALLENGES, DESPAIR IS NOT AN OPTION



By Duncan Shrubsole

The roadblocks to a Better Way are many and, as set out in *Building a Bigger We*, we've been gathering insights about how we can tackle them. In this concluding essay to this publication, Duncan Shrubsole reflects on the challenges we face and on how we should respond to them.

Our times are terrifying, bewildering and immensely challenging.

War in Europe – millions of refugees, rape, torture, destruction and death, taking us back to scenes reminiscent of the Second World War. The cost-of-living crisis affecting all but pushing millions who were already on the edge over it. The climate crisis, ever starker, yet the will to tackle it slipping away. Partygate and the loss of trust in our leaders and politics when we need good leadership more than ever. A raft of long-term challenges that don't hit the headlines but shape them nonetheless – poverty, racism, lack of housing, underfunding of our public services, mental ill-health, social fragmentation and more.

And, given this pace of events, we have barely had the opportunity to process the last two years and the level of trauma that people individually and collectively experienced from Covid, lockdowns and their ongoing impacts.

It can feel easy to despair. But for those of us who want a better, fairer, greener world, despair is not an option. In a blog I wrote back in May 2020 I said: 'So we who will a better world need to be putting in the hard graft now to build the practical, policy and political cases for the changes we seek and persuading people to make it happen.' Nearly two years on that seems even more, not less, important.

So how can we build a country and beyond where, as a Better Way calls for, 'Everyone is heard and believed in, given a fair opportunity to thrive, and the ability to influence the things that matter to them'? How can we turn frustration to action, despair to resolve, deliberation to real change – not just willing a better world but actively helping it to happen?

I humbly suggest six things:

1. Understand the context we are living through and working in – to remake the world we also have to understand it – the trends that are helpful, as well as the challenges and the blockers. The NCVO Road Ahead document is a good place to start but much can also be gleaned from an inquiring mind and constant conversation with those swimming with us, those stuck in the tide and those we must win over.

2. Focus on the cause not the organisation – the challenges we face are too big for any one of us. The model of the heroic individual leader or large brand are certainly not up to the task. We need to focus on advancing causes and building movements, not individual organisations. Easy to say, sometimes hard to do, particularly if you are a charity trying to bring in enough income to keep the lights on. That's why it's most incumbent on those who have the broadest shoulders to carry the largest load – funders, larger charities, established leaders – to reach out and across, ask what they can do to help, not, as was too often the case in the past, expecting others to fall in line. This also requires us all to look out for and after each other.

3. Build from the ground up – we all saw that the things that worked best during lockdowns were built and led locally and the things that failed were top-down and led by central government (Test and Trace and its utter waste of £37 billion being the prime example). As we captured in research we commissioned at Lloyds Bank Foundation, small and local charities played a particularly

important role in responding to the big crisis of Covid that we faced. And 150,000 households signing up to host refugees in communities right across the UK is shaming the callous incompetence and rigid bureaucracy of the Home Office. So street by street, community by community, region by region, nation by nation we can and must come together to build an effective response to the challenges we face.

4. Look for allies not enemies, build bridges not dividing lines – we know there are politicians, newspapers and others seeking to create and fan the flames of 'culture wars'. Whilst we must be resolute in defending positions when under attack, evidence suggests the public are much less interested than those fanning the flames think. We also need to be honest with ourselves that sometimes in our own passion for a cause we can be too quick to mistrust the motives of those who disagree with us on a course of action, missing that they actually shared our concern, and just had a different view of how to get there. Even where there are MPs, newspapers and institutions who may hold views on certain issues that we find challenging, we should seek to tap into the things that do positively motivate them – indeed mobilising 'unusual suspects' has been key to many victories. And in our choice and use of language we can sometimes alienate potential friends and allies, making issues harder to resolve not easier.

5. Celebrate, be inspired by and learn from all the fantastic changes that have been achieved – as the old saying

goes, wherever there is human misery 'look for the helpers'. Ukraine is sadly giving us a masterclass in this now. But despite all of the challenges I started this blog with, campaigns are being won on a regular basis on a whole range of issues – Kirsty McNeill is running this list of **campaign successes in 2022** alone. They should each inspire us and we should actively learn from them.

6. Don't stop believing – as the song says! We know it can be done, change can be achieved. The vote, gay rights, the NHS, the United Nations, the Geneva Convention, the welfare state, action on climate change, international debt

relief, the end of Apartheid, changing attitudes to mental health and so, so much more were all won through people campaigning, arguing, fighting, mobilising, protesting and persuading.

We in civil society must be the thinkers, the dreamers, the uniters, the builders, the lifter-uppers, the change makers. Let's get to it!

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